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ABSTRACT

How teachers methodically construct report card comments into organized social features is addressed through an examination of negotiation structures which organize anecdotes. Anecdotal comments are key communication devices which teachers employ for reporting. Four hundred and fifty anecdotal comments teachers wrote about students were collected from private and public elementary school teachers throughout British Columbia. Content analysis was undertaken to characterize the anecdotes within a framework of negotiation structures. Negotiation was used to mean the typical conversational devices teachers used which structured parents to accept the comment, and which supported teacher recommendations without a loss of image. The following 10 negotiation structures were identified: praise (P); strength-weakness (SW); weakness-strength (WS); avoidance of reference (AOR); legitimizers (L); reporting, sleight-of-hand (SOH); reporting, rectification (R); teacher expectation, student potential (SP); pin-point discrepancies (PPD); and challengers (C). Teachers should remember: (1) P could be difficult to live up to; (2) C criticisms are almost impossible to accept; (3) ACR and SP sound positive, but are limited in substantive matter; (4) L removes a student's responsibility for a problem; and (5) R, PPD, SW, and WS are perhaps the most acceptable in social terms. (RL)

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TEACHER EVALUATION COMMENTS WITHIN PROGRAM EVALUATION: AN ANALYSIS OF NEGOTIATION STRUCTURES

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TEACHER EVALUATION COMMENTS WITHIN PROGRAM EVALUATION:
AN ANALYSIS OF NEGOTIATION STRUCTURES

Educational programs are usually referenced according to pre-defined objectives, teacher/student tasks and resources. Paralleling this view are evaluation designs based on objective research procedures which focus on quantitative information about generalizeable features of a program. Statistical generalizations about enumerated program characteristics are sought. That is, quantitative methodology is selected which assumes the desirability and even necessity of applying reconstructed logic to programs far removed for the everyday reality of school.

Evaluators who strictly adhere to quantitative methodology usually view programs as means-ends relations. Based on a means-ends rationale, the evaluator's emphasis on applied techniques (means) is tantamount to suggesting, advising, guiding, recommending and/or dictating how programs can be improved in terms of increased student learning (recently measured by test scores), the efficiency of resource allocation, and the predictability of goal attainment.

The program, however, as used in a school, is acted upon by various individuals within a social setting. According to Parlett and Hamilton (1972), the setting is a learning mileau which represents a network or nexus of cultural, social, institutional and psychological variables. They interact in complicated ways to produce unique circumstances, pressures and customs which suffuse teaching and learning. Once a program is acted upon in a classroom, it influences people as much as people influence it. For example, teachers may interpret the program according to situational influences, such as, time, location, teacher

training, and experience, etc. Students may experience the program according to their own life styles. biography, teachers, and their relationships with administrators, and fellow students. In part, parents may view the program according to their children's discussions about school, and final report cards about their progress. Administrators may perceive the program according to organization, implementation, cost, and students, teachers, central office administrators, and parents' satisfaction with different facets of program related variables. Such interrelated features are of paramount importance when we attempt to define the logic-in-use of a program in a classroom.

A key variable which influences the program-in-use is communication. Of particular note are student report cards. Students are evaluated in terms of meeting defined expectations within the parameters of programs-in-use. Parents receive "objective" grades and "subjective" teacher anecdotal comments which are based on a student's relationship to specific programs. Whenever parents receive report cards, they attain a picture of how their child, for all practical purposes, is doing in school. The portrayal may significantly influence the program-in-use in significant ways. For example, totally negative anecdotal comments, or badly worded comments about a child may motivate parents to contact the principal and/or teacher to register a complaint. The parents' action may influence teachers' approaches to the program in that they might re-examine their evaluation procedures, relationships to students, and instructional techniques. Also, since students exchange report cards, any detrimentally embarrassing comments about students, evidenced by

other students may produce animosity between students and teacher. This may influence a student to become less involved in classroom activities. Hence, the everydayness of the program may shift because the teacher, being aware of the student's changed attitude(s) may explicitly alter instructional strategies or implicitly maintain different relationships with that student. For example, during classroom discussions, students, once called upon to comment, may now be the overlooked. Hence the program-in-use is re-defined by teacher and students.

Rules as Explanations for Report Cards

Report cards are rule-governed social phenomena which are grounded in common-sense thought. They are incorporated within the social world as experienced by those living in it. According to Schutz:

> The world, as it presents itself to the member operating under the jurisdiction of the attitude of everyday life, is a historical, already organized world.... The member takes for granted that the social world and, more specifically, the aspect of it relevant to his interest at hand, is actually or potentially assembled by rule or recipe. That is, he may know, or take it that he could determine by inquiry, the rules or recipes whereby he and others might gear into or understand some activity. Put another way, the member assumes that such structures are actually or potentially locatable and determinable in their features by recourse to such practices as asking for or giving instructions concerning a given matter. Everday activities

> and the perceived connected features present themselves with the promise that they may be understood and acted upon in practically sufficient ways by competent employment of appropriate proverbs, paradigms, motives, organizational charts, and the like.
> (cited in Wieder, 1974:30)

In using the idea of rule governed conduct underlying report card writing, it could be said that there exists a normative order of observable social facts. For example, Speier (1973) proposed six suppositions which he considered to be facts for classifying naturalistic everyday life events of which one is report cards. The first is that the events of everyday life are organized into an ongoing social order. Second, persons perform actions with respect to others in their environment, who are likewise able to perform actions in return. Third, human action is based on subjective interpretations on the part of the social actor. The fourth supposition is that everyday rationality in social situations is the exercise of the subjective interpretations that are possible within a common-sense frame of reference in thinking, or knowledge, and which enter into the construction of everyday discourse. Fifth, lay conceptions constitute an organization of social experience that provide a topic of analysis worthy of study, indeed necessary to study of social experience. Sixth, all forms of human organization are based on the joint lines of action of participants, that is to say, they are brought together by their own concerted behaviors.

The aforementioned suppositions provide the basis for answering the question: How do members of society methodically construct interactions

into mutually organized social activity? Within the context of this article the question is rephrased: How do teachers methodically construct report card comments into organized social features? An attempt to address the rephrased query will now be made through an examination of negotiation structures which organize anecdotes.

Reporting as Negotiation

An important component of the report card is the teacher's written narrative about particular aspects of the student's achievement and/or behavior. Through written comments, teachers express their views on how students are meeting academic and/or social expectations. Whenever parents read anecdotal comments, they assume that teachers have taken a stance with respect to forming an impression of their children and that the full impression or view of the child is fully portrayed in the comments provided. However, as in natural conversation, whenever a stance is conveyed, the process of conveyance is as important as the content of the message.

Whether parents accept, believe, or act upon the message depends on the manner, or negotiation tactics utilized in the written comments. In natural conversation, negotiation work is done by participants which saves the image of interactants (Goffman, 1967). Negotiation is defined as an everyday interaction process during which interactants relay messages in such a way that they do not destroy one anothers image or

meaningful presence. Whenever image saving interaction fails, arguments, violence, frustrations, and broken relationships may occur. It is safe to say that most people are competent interactors in that most of the time they negotiate their emotional responses with one another.

To develop anecdotal comments which portray an evaluative stance yet save the images or sense of person of students and parents, teachers must conduct competent negotiation. The effectiveness of negotiation between teachers, students and parents influences the parents' receptivity of the comments, which, in turn, affects the degree to which parents support a teacher's stance, and further, the program.

Rationale for Analyzing Negotiated Comments

Anecdotal comments are key communication devices which teachers employ for reporting. They may be considered naturally occurring written communication procedures within the context of home and school. In order to make sense of written narratives, parents and teachers should have an understanding of underlying interpretive competencies. That is, teachers must be aware of typical communication devices which enhance parental understanding and receptivity of teacher views, and parents should understand the meaning of evaluative phrases within the context of home and school. For example, by carefully negotiating criticism, teachers implicitly help parents accept criticisms and support remedial actions which are a primary purpose of anecdotal comments.

If negotiation is not used by teachers when writing anecdotal comments, relationships may be altered. Rather than concentrating on the substance of comments, parents may question the rights of teachers to criticize the morality of the school to allow gross criticisms, the role of the principal in supporting teachers who develop aggressive criticisms, and the overall relationship between school and community. Additional interaction work may be required between teachers, parents, and perhaps principals to re-establish proper home-school relationships, and thereby maintain an acceptable program-in-use.

Purpose for the Analysis

Teacher anecdotal comments were analyzed according to identifiable structures teachers employed to generate anecdotal comments. The purpose for outlining structures was to classify them according to how teachers and parents make sense of anecdotal comments, and how they may order their behavior accordingly. It is assumed that their behavior influences the everyday nature of a program.

The author's interest was to study comments as they occur in their natural interactive environment. The intent of the analysis was not to provide quantitative data pertaining to the number of times categories appeared in the data, but rather to produce a description of categories teachers use in natural recognizable written interaction. It should be recognized that the categories implicit in the data and reported in this article were not exhaustive, but rather, they were the most easily identifiable recurring negotiation structures.

Format for the Analysis

Four hundred and fifty anecdotal comments teachers wrote about students were collection from private and public elementary school teachers throughout British Columbia. The anecdotes pertained to all subjects taught in the elementary grades.

The data which were analyzed were naturally occurring written forms of interaction. The examples in the text were not elicited, remembered, edited or invented to provide illustration for some analytic design.

Content analysis was undertaken to characterize the anecdotes within a framework of what actually takes place and how negotiation structures are taken for granted by the readers of comments. The analysis was motivated by taking seriously the details of written anecdotes and the assumed structural features which give them their interactive meaning.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the analysis and accompanying discussion are reported according to the structures which were found in the data. Each structure is described according to its meaningfulness as it pertains to everyday life. Examples from the data are included to illustrate the structures.

Praise

Teachers often developed comments which were founded entirely on praise. Praise structures include a succession of compliments. No mention of weaknesses are made. Since people typically prefer positive descriptions about themselves or individuals close to them, such structures may be considered preferred statements. An example of such statements found in the collection of report cards were:

> Kevin is a super pupil, sensitive, quiet, extremely hardworking, an exceptionally strong, independent worker. Simply give him a task, set him loose, and it will be done to a high standard in a minimum of time.

Adjectives like "super, sensitive, quiet, extremely hardworking, exceptionally strong", etc. are complimentary responses which indicate high levels of praise for Kevin. The positive description provides Kevin, his parents, and perhaps his schoolmates with an image of Kevin that he must, for all practical purposes, sustain. Questions worth asking are: Do Kevin or his parents believe that he deserves this praise? Can Kevin maintain the image which the teacher has portrayed? Can Kevin better himself in light of the generous compliments he has received? and What did Kevin do to merit this comment?

Strength - Weakness Negotiation

Often teachers perceived student weaknesses which they wish to communicate to parents. The Strength-Weakness structure allowed teachers to preface weaknesses or criticisms about students with strong, positive-sounding complimentary statements. Whenever teachers interlock

strengths with weaknesses, it tends to "soften the blow" or "frame an optimistic outlook", which helps retain a positive relationship between teachers and parents by avoiding potential conflicts. A representative example of Strength-Weakness negotiation found in the data was:

> Carol makes an attempt to understand what is required of her, but she has difficulty in interpreting some of the questioins. Carol understands oral work more than written work but she is hesitant to speak out in a group.

The strength categories, "attempting to understand" and "understanding oral work" found in the anecdote effectively balance the weakness categories, "difficulty in interpreting questions" and "hesitancy to speak out in a group". Strength category is followed by the incongruous qualifier, "but". The strength categories frame the weakness categories by originally placing the reader in a positive frame of mind before reading a criticism. This tact is effectively used in everyday life whenever persons desire to criticize yet help recipients of the criticisms retain positive images of themselves.

Weakness-Strength Negotiation

The Weakness-Strength category is the converse of the former structure. It is usually employed by teachers who wish to create an impact on parents by beginning an anecdote with a weakness. Following a statement of weakness, is a strength, or positive-sounding statement. The inclusion of a positive statement subsequent to a negative comment could be described as a retrospective instruction, intended to preserve the character of the student. For example, although a student has

defined weaknesses, the parents, after reading the latter strength descriptions, are apt to re-interpret the student as not being entirely weak, but also possessing positive redeeming features. The Weakness-Strength structure is employed to help preserve the images of students.

A representative illustration of a Weakness-Strength structure apparent in the report cards was:

> John gives the impression that he has difficulty following gym instructions; however, John is capable of following the gym program.

John's teacher outlined the weakness that John has difficulty following instructions. However, the teacher did not wish to conclude the comment with the parent internalizing an entirely negative view of John. Hence, John's teacher affiliated a strength to the weakness, namely, John's ability to follow the gym program. This structure suggests that John's parents interpret his weakness in light of his strength, thereby helping to save John's image.

Avoidance of Reference

Evident in the collected report cards were descriptions which did not have reference points. For example, teachers used gloss words such as improve, better and develop to signify positive change without referencing the point from which a student has improved, or developed, and the new behavior or achievement the student has attained. The Avoidance of Reference structures could be assumed as socially acceptable

because of their positive view of change. However, such structures can be questioned according to substantive data which support the announcement of change. The following example taken from the data illustrates the Avoidance of Reference structure:

> Donovan is a consistent, hardworking student. His printing habits have improved and are now being transferred into other subjects. He follows directions well and his Arithmetic and Reading skills are being well established.

In the above example, the avoidance concept "improved" was used by Donovan's teacher. Although improvement indicates a positive change, the teacher does not provide information about the level of improvement. Donovan's parents would, in all likelihood, interpret this comment positively, although no reference points for printing habits were included.

Legitimizers

Teachers frequently outlined students' weaknesses or problems and placed them within broader frameworks. Hence, problems outlined in anecdotes became routine problems for which students should not be held responsibile. Legitimizers are positive negotiation structures in that they imply natural occurrences within an assumed and accepted framework of life. An illustration is:

> Karen does not seem to have any problems other than the normal ones of girls her age. I can see no academic problems she has to face at this time. Her marks are very solid with little change of dropping if she keeps up the effort she has so far this year.

By implying that Karen's problems are normal girl problems, Karen's teacher implied that Karen has problems, but that they are normal, and therefore do not require further attention. The universal framework of girl problems provided Karen's parents with a positive legitimation of Karen's behavior. Hence, any attempt to solve Karen's problems would involve remediation at a wider social level.

Reporting: Sleight-of-Hand

Based on the analysis of anecdotes, a negotiation structure which appeared regularly could be referred to as Reporting: Sleight-of-Hand. Teachers would report an incident, event, circumstances, act, or negative student behavior and affiliate it with statements which lessen the seriousness of the original claim, or continue with an entirely new thought. By employing this structure, teachers instruct parents not to take the initial comment too seriously in light of further commentary. The Reporting: Sleight-of-Hand structure leaves itself open to the question, "Why did the teacher make a claim if no back-up evidence is provided, and/or if the seriousness of the claim is reduced or eliminated? The following illustration highlights this structure:

> Except for occasional spells of petty foolishness (note-passing, gossip), Norma works well. Her written work is improving because she is learning to check her own work for careless errors.

The teacher claimed that Norma engaged in "spells of petty foolishness" such as note-passing and gossip. Immediately following this claim, the teacher shifted focus by describing Norma's work patterns. The change in reasoning implies that Norma's spells of petty foolishness should not be taken that seriously since Norma works well.

Reporting: Rectification

Whereas the Reporting: Sleight-of-Hand design signifies reduced seriousness of an original claim, the Reporting Rectification structure implies increased seriousness. A teacher reports a student incident, weakness or fault, along with a suggested strategy or formula which may help remedy the student problem. The suggestion for improvement a teacher makes reflects the teacher's perception of the seriousness of a matter and the degrees to which it can be improved. In the data, the remedial measures often included parent participation, as illustrated in the following example:

> In Language Arts, Kim is having a lot of difficulty naming letters and associating the correct sound with the letter. Because of this, he has difficulty in completing assignments correctly. I would appreciate an interview with you so that we could work together to help Kim overcome his problem.

In the first part of the comment, Kim's teacher defined the difficulties Kim experienced in Language Arts. However, indications are that Kim can overcome his problems if his parents visit the teacher and discuss the matter. The invitation for an interview implied both a need to help Kim and teacher consideration whereby the teacher was willing to spend time and energy on a parents' child. The offer to help leaves a positive image with parents because they can visualize teacher concern and student improvement, both of which are important ingredients for the parents' view of Kim and the teacher.

Teacher Expectation: Student Potential

Based on the analysis of teacher comments, a structure which kept re-appearing, was teachers' expectations of a child couched within the reasoning of student potential. Whenever a concept like potential is used to describe another person's performance, one needs to ask whether people can reach their potential and how you know when potential has been reached. The Teacher Expectations: Student Potential structure provides parents with vague evaluative descriptions about their children. Unless teachers have previously discussed criteria for potential, report card narratives about potential are glossy, in that they can easily be interpreted from different points of view to provide positive meanings. In the data, teachers did not include a criterion for judging the degree to which students have achieved their potential. A representative example of a Teacher Expectation: Student Potential structure found in the data was:

> Fred has a potential that could be developed. He is an active person and therefore does not always find group situations easy to work in. Individually, he does well.

It is reasonable to assume that all students have potential which can be developed. The teacher did not concretely define Fred's potential, nor was there a description of Fred's ability to reach his potential, assuming an individual can reach his potential. The everyday usage of a person's potential is a positive description, often used to gloss weaknesses. However, when people use potential in daily interaction, they usually provide contextual clues. For example, a hockey player may have the potential to be a superstar by scoring fifty goals in one

season, although he has scored only ten goals to date at mid-season. Here, potential is defined within scoring output. In the teacher anecdotal comments, such contextual clues were omitted. Consequently, such comments may be positive for parents, but they have so many potential meanings that they could be described as meaningless cliches.

Pin-point Discrepancies

A conversational structure which was extracted from the data could be defined as Pin-Point Discrepancies. Teachers outlined students' performances which were compared to teacher expectations. The comparison became the discrepancy between what students did and what they should have done. The discrepancies were often framed within strength-weakness designs, as illustrated in the following example:

> Sam makes every effort to do his work well. His research skills are developing, but his work is still literal as opposed to indepth statistics. He is quick to finish his work, sometimes to the detriment of neatness and comprehensiveness. Sam works well individually or in a group. Sam has a satisfactory understanding of the work, but oral expression is sometimes a challenge to him.

The discrepancies appearing in the above comment are Sam's literal work as opposed to the teacher's expectation of in-depth statistical work, and Sam's quick completion of work as compared to the teacher's expectation of neatness. Underlying this comment was the teacher's subtle desire for improvement, evident in the implicit contrast of Sam's performance and the teacher's expectations.

Whenever Pin-Point Discrepancies are used, the teacher's expectations are usually considered 'a prior' legitimate. Although students may have done well in some educational endeavours, they did not achieve adequately in areas deemed important by teachers. The subtlety of the call for improvement towards teacher expectations would stir parents to attention, which increases the effectiveness of the comment. In typical conversation, pin-point discrepancies within strength-weakness negotiation designs could be regarded as positive interaction tact.

Challengers

Based on the data, it became evident that teachers frequently commented on students' perceived misconducts with strong emotive terms and phrases. No strength comments were included. Usually, all-out criticisms arouse anyone's emotions. Within the context of report cards, strongly phrased negatives about a child could result in parents becoming indignant with teachers' personalities, rather than concern for their youngsters' weaknesses.

When teachers employed challenger structures, they appeared to rely on time and space between writer and reader. For example, if teachers offered written challenger anecdotes verbally to parents in a public place, the resulting interaction could be volatile, if not violent. Few people like to have members of their families degraded or severely criticized without opportunities to save their image. If the purpose for writing student report card comments is to change, or retain a child's achievement or behavior, a challenger structure would be fruitless

because total denial of students' strengths could develop conflicts between teachers, students and parents. An example of a Challenger structure is:

> Frank never did his homework and never handed in an essay. Zero effort. He is a negative influence on me and the class.

If the intent of Frank's teacher was to seek improvement in Frank's school activities, it is doubtful that it succeeded. By employing definitive terms like never, and phrases like zero effort and negative influence, the teachers did not offer openings for Frank or his parents to retain a positive self-image. There appears to be little chance that Frank's parents would interpret the criticisms as constructive or sensitive. Consequently, a dramatic reaction or confrontation between Frank's parents and the teacher could be anticipated. Typical questions which may come to parents' minds are: Who does the teacher think s/he is to say that about my son? and What right does the teacher have to belittle my child?

Implications and Conclusions

When teachers attempt to influence, change or retain a level of student behavior, or a certain relationship of a student to a program, they should be aware of conversational structures which can be used for negotiation. By negotiation, it is not meant that teachers should play-down or lie about student weaknesses, but rather that teachers use

typical conversational devices which structure parents to accept the comment, and support teacher recommendations without a loss of image. Teachers should remember that praise could be difficult to live up to and challenger criticisms are almost impossible to accept. Glosses, like avoidance of references and student potential sound positive, but they are limited in substantive matter. Legitimizers are effective if the teacher's intent is to remove a student's responsibility for a problem. Reporting: Rectification, Pin-Point Discrepancies, Strength-Weakness and Weakness-Strength Negotiations are perhaps the most acceptable in social terms because they are substantive, yet allow parents to retain positive images of themselves and their children.

Whenever teachers develop anecdotes, the substance of the comment may be lost in the emotional reaction to the communication structures. Questions of which teachers should be aware when developing student anecdotal comments are: Would you like to have someone write about you as you have written about the student? Of the universe of qualities a student possesses, why was a certain quality highlighted? Has a negative incident recently occurred before a comment was written which negated numerous positive incidents? What would be a typical parent reaction resulting from this comment? Why am I writing this comment about another human being? How will the parents and students react to the comment? and How will their reaction potentially change the everydayness of the classroom?

The following aphorism seems appropriate:

> I know you believe that you understand what you think I wrote. But I am not sure you realize that what you read is not what I meant.
> Wittgenstein

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